

Afghan Fighting Season Begins Amid Political Deadlock

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Taliban may exploit power vacuum as election result controversy continues.

Analysts have warned that the continuing deadlock over the Afghan presidential run-off is being exploited by insurgents as the traditional summer “fighting season” begins.

Former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah has rejected preliminary results from the June 14 vote which were announced by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) this week, giving him 43.6 per cent of the vote.

The IEC said his rival, former world bank economist and finance minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, won 56.4 per cent of the vote, according to early figures. Final official results will be released on July 22.

Abdullah has demanded an audit of some 7,000 polling stations to check for electoral fraud. (See **High Turnout and Fraud Claims in Afghan Run-Off.**)

Analysts warn that the political stand-off could be exploited by armed opposition groups who have already launched an offensive in the strategically vital Helmand province. Local residents say insurgents there are using more sophisticated equipment than in previous years.

The summer offensive, which the Taliban codenamed “Khaibar”, began in Helmand in late June with an intensive ten-day sequence of attacks in the northern districts of Sangin, Musa Qala, Kajaki and Nawzad.

Helmand police chief Abdul Qayum Baqizoi told IWPR that government forces sustained about 100 casualties, with about 400 on the insurgent side. In addition, 50 civilians were killed, 400 were injured, and thousands of families were forced to flee their homes.

Sardar Mohammad Hamdard, a civil society leader in Helmand, said the recent violence was a calamity for local people, with more than 4,000 families displaced.

“People from the area have contacted me by phone. They asked for help. These poor people have received no aid. They need massive assistance,” he said. “There are injured people among them; they have no food, no tents, and they don’t even have drinking water because all the roads are blocked. There are land mines so people can’t travel from one place to another.”

Shaking with anger, tribal elder Hashem Alokozay said he had travelled to the main provincial town Lashkargah a month ago with community from Sangin and other districts to warn government officials that the insurgents were preparing an offensive.

These warnings were dismissed, he said.

“We told them that unidentified people were seen among the Taliban this year and that they also had new, modern weapons which we hadn’t seen before,” Alokozai said. “They should have made preparations, but they felt our comments had no substance to them.”

Police chief Baqizoi agreed that the insurgents were fighting with more modern weapons compared with past years, but insisted they would be beaten.

“The armed Taliban came to the battlefield intending to capture some areas, but they will fulfill that wish only in their graves,” he said.

General Atiqullah Amarkhel, formerly of the Afghan National Army and now a defence analyst, said security forces all around Afghanistan, and in Helmand in particular, had lost focus after the huge push to safeguard the June 14 polls. Combat readiness, intelligence gathering and coordination among different forces had all been allowed to lapse, he said.

According to Amarkhel, the Taliban spotted this and used the opportunity to launch a particularly intense attack. He warned that if the militants won control of Helmand, it would be very hard to root them out again, noting also the immense profits to be made from the drugs trade.

“A huge proportion of the world’s opium is produced in Helmand,” he added.

In Kabul, Afghan officials have repeated the assertion that the insurgents are foreign rather than Afghan.

Outgoing president Hamed Karzai has long argued that the conflict has been fuelled by foreign actors, and

called on the United States to focus its counter-insurgency efforts on neighbouring Pakistan rather than Afghanistan.

In a recent press release, Karzai said foreign fighters had been spotted in Helmand, and appealed to the Taliban to disown them.

"If the Afghan Taliban are not involved in the war, they should clearly declare that it is not being waged by them," he wrote.

In similar vein, national security adviser Rangin Dadfar Spanta told a news conference that Pakistani forces had been seen in Helmand, Kunar and elsewhere in the country.

"This is blatant aggression by Pakistan against Afghanistan, and I have discussed it seriously with the Pakistani side," he said.

At a specially convened parliamentary session on the violence, National Directorate of Security chief Rahmatullah Nabil told lawmakers that Iran's Revolutionary Guard as well as the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, service had taken advantage of the Afghan elections to sow further instability.

According to Nabil, Tehran and Islamabad were both aware that the presidential race would go to a run-off and that a power vacuum would be left, presenting a perfect opportunity for them to move in.

"If the political arguments and power vacuum persist, I can assure you that the current problems will expand massively," he added.

Helmand governor Mohammad Naim also accused the ISI of direct involvement in the fresh fighting in the province.

"It wasn't just Afghan Taliban," he said. "A large number of Punjabis came with them. Local residents saw them... there were individuals with their faces covered fighting in the Taliban ranks. They also killed Taliban who either did not fight or who retreated."

Naim said that around 6,000 insurgents were involved in the recent round of violence.

"Helmand has joint borders with both Iran and Pakistan and neither country has good relations with us," he said. "They therefore reinforce our opponents and sometimes they interfere directly. Helmand is also a major world centre for opium. The drug mafia, too, supports our opponents."

The governments of Iran and Pakistan have always rejected allegations of interference. Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi also denied that foreign fighters had taken part in recent battles.

"We are all Afghan Taliban. No one is helping us wage war," he said, adding that government forces had suffered heavy casualties and while the insurgents captured many areas.

Ahmadi also hit back at suggestions that the Taliban offensive had been contained, insisting that fighting was still going on and would do so for some time.

"We have the same weapons as the government forces," he said. "Our mujahedin have been trained well and their morale is high. That's why the war seems different to the government people."

For locals in Helmand, the toll has been high.

"Most wounded people who could have recovered died because they were not taken to hospital," said Hajji Shamsullah Khan, a tribal elder in Sangin.

Agha Mohammad fled the fighting and sought refuge with a friend in Lashkar Gah.

"I only just managed to get my family out alive. I left everything else at home," he said. "I am very distressed about people who are still stuck in the midst of fighting. The Taliban use civilians as shields. They show no mercy, particularly the ones whose faces are concealed - they aren't human beings at all."

Kamaluddin, from Sangin, also escaped to the provincial capital, but he has no contacts there to help him and now survives by begging.

"I used to give money to beggars. Today I am begging myself in order to feed my children," he said. "God knows, I feel very ashamed."

Gol Ahmad Ehsan is an IWPR reporter in Helmand province.

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